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Back Home in the U.S.S.R.

A Soviet defector recants, spinning a yarn worthy of a spy novel

The story had all the makings of an espionage bestseller. Chapter 1: Against a romantic backdrop of canals and palaces, Oleg Bitov, a high-level Soviet journalist, disappears from his hotel while covering the Venice Film Festival in September 1983. Chapter 2: Bitov, the former foreign culture editor of Moscow's *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, surfaces in London a month later and issues a statement declaring that he has fled his homeland to protest the repression of intellectuals and, in particular, to denounce the Soviets for shooting down Korean Air Lines Flight 007 on Sept. 1, 1983. His defection is hailed as a major coup for British intelligence, which provides the journalist with money, a Toyota and a house in rural Sussex. Chapter 3: Bitov vanishes from London, leaving his car illegally parked near the Soviet embassy and about \$50,000 untouched in his British bank account.

Last week Bitov wrote Chapter 4 at a curious press conference held in Moscow. Looking tired and drawn, the 52-year-old gray-haired editor read an account of what he called his kidnaping, torture and blackmail at the hands of British intelligence agents. As Bitov told it, his ordeal began on the night of Sept. 8, 1983, when he returned to his hotel room in Venice "only to get a terrible blow at the back of my head." He claimed that he was drugged and put on an Alitalia flight from Pisa to London with a forged British passport in the name of David Locke.

Bitov declared that the "Sherlock Holmeses" who interrogated him at an army barracks near London were unable to prove that he was a KGB spy, despite their use of "blackmail," "bribery" and "physical violence." Once British agents realized that he had no intelligence value, he said, they offered him "a well-paid job in the gallery of mud-slinging anti-Sovieters." Bitov said he escaped by gaining his captors' trust and then slipping off unnoticed to buy a one-way airline ticket to Moscow. In an attempt to add credibility to his story, he named his alleged captors, gave the addresses of two safe houses where he was hidden by British intelligence, and read out the telephone numbers of the intelligence service's London offices—which enterprising Fleet Street reporters promptly called. The phones were answered by operators who refused to give any information, and shortly afterward the lines were disconnected.

The British government, which had granted Bitov political asylum last January, told quite a different story: Bitov originally had approached Italian police in Venice in September 1983 and informed them that he wanted to defect to the U.K. The Italians in turn alerted the British embassy in Rome; an agent of the Secret Intelligence Service met with Bitov and



Oleg Bitov at his Moscow press conference

judged him to be a genuine defector.

Arrangements were quickly made to fly him to London. There, after exhaustive debriefing, he began to write and broadcast articles portraying himself as a Soviet intellectual who had realized his secret ambition to escape to the West. In two lengthy pieces that appeared in the London *Sunday Telegraph* last February, Bitov described how Moscow's leadership used the press as an Orwellian "Ministry of Truth," relying on an all-pervasive censorship largely imposed by Soviet journalists themselves. After the articles were



London safe house cited by the journalist

A Toyota, a book contract and \$50,000.

published, the security net around Bitov began to relax, and he was no longer accompanied everywhere by an intelligence agent.

Bitov seemed to be settling into a normal life. In March he signed a contract with the British publisher Hamish Hamilton to write a book on Soviet censorship called *Tales I Could Not Tell*. In May he visited the U.S. as a guest of *Reader's Digest*. On his return, Bitov went to Paris, where he was offered a job with Radio Liberty, the U.S.-supported radio station that broadcasts to the Soviet Union, and gave three 15-minute interviews. But something was not quite right. Friends noticed that Bitov was growing touchy and suffering from fits of depression. He seemed especially affected by the long separation from his wife Ludmilla, 38, and daughter Xenia, 15, whom he once described as "the dearest creature in all the world." Just before his disappearance last August, he reportedly told several fellow Soviet émigrés that he had cancer and was going into the hospital for tests and treatment.

Precisely how and when Bitov returned to the Soviet Union remains a mystery. Some observers speculate that he was abducted by the KGB. Others suggest that he could have been a KGB plant, sent by the Kremlin to gather useful information about the way British intelligence deals with defectors. Both theories, however, were discounted by a senior British intelligence officer involved in the case. Said he: "Bitov was certainly not a double agent, of that we are sure. He was, in our assessment, enticed back, not abducted." Bitov's future position could provide clues to his new role. He told Western reporters last week that he would resume his former job, which would imply some kind of official blessing. If he becomes a nonperson, as British intelligence officials predict, it will suggest he was operating on his own.

Derek Thomas, political director of the Foreign Office, summoned Soviet Chargé d'Affaires Nikolai Posilyagin and informed him that London found Bitov's statements in Moscow "absurd and offensive." The Soviets, for their part, did not appear eager to turn the episode into an East-West diplomatic incident—especially on the eve of Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko's meetings with President Ronald Reagan and other U.S. officials this week. Indeed, the Soviet press seemed to downplay Bitov's torture charges. Said a Western diplomat in Moscow: "It looks as if the Soviet authorities do not want to make an enormous issue out of this."

Whatever the explanation, the Bitov affair has clearly damaged the prestige of British intelligence. What had appeared a triumphant success has turned into an embarrassing failure. As for the Soviets, they have again proved the value of one of their most useful weapons against defection: rarely allowing a citizen to travel abroad with family.

—By Thomas A. Sancton.
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